

FROM THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOMS

A REASON TO CELEBRATE ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF SCIENCE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Preamble

"...the birth of a lusty infant..." This was Dr R.S. Rogers's evocation of the South Australian Institute in his Presidential Address as published in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of South Australia* in 1922. Further, in his definitive *History of the Society*, he describes how its "junior member", the Adelaide Philosophical Society, was founded on January 10th 1853, one hundred and fifty years ago. Eventually, that Adelaide Philosophical Society had bestowed upon it the Royal patronage, a status that we, as the Royal Society of South Australia Inc., have proudly maintained for nearly one and a quarter centuries.

Traditionally, each new volume of the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* has, in its business-like way, launched straight into a presentation of scientific novelty on page one. Unashamedly, the ultimate page of the *Transactions* is generally the last page of a Brief Communication that represents some "breaking" scientific knowledge. Only when the occasion arises, have the Editors added an obituary to celebrate the outstanding career in science of a recently deceased Fellow of the Society.

Today, we break with that format. We have opened the first Volume of the *Transactions* for 2003 with a celebration of our Society's infancy and adolescence. Council suggested that I prepare that celebration. Particularly, I intend to celebrate the importance of some of the early contributors to our establishment. Whilst that establishment occurred in a colony inured from London to "...diffuse useful knowledge among the colonists...", its critical mass of population would have only had a limited intrinsic pool of intellectual diversity. I hope that my focus on these early beginnings will stimulate an emergence of some of our present Fellows to become charged with similar invigorating initiatives or a greater involvement in the Royal Society of South Australia of the twenty first century. Notably, such initiatives might be aimed at our Society's current need to disseminate a greater excitement of scientific curiosity to a general community whose quest for knowledge clearly remains unfulfilled. Perhaps such initiatives might involve management or policy-making within the Society. Our need for help with a range of aspects of our publications is always a priority. Alternatively, our readers may be moved to

augment or drive a novel approach to the scientific programme. Personally, I am particularly interested in encouraging our younger Fellows to realise their worth. Indeed, while the average age of our Fellowship might be considered as 'mature', the gentlemen who launched the Society were, in fact, very young.

The Birth of a Vision

In 1853, five gentlemen gathered in Mr John L. Young's house in Stephen's Place, Adelaide, to formally establish a Society "... for the discussion of all subjects connected with science, literature and the arts".

Young, together with the Chairman of this preliminary meeting, John Howard Clark, a former editor of *The Register*, had been fellow students at King's College, London. Both were 23 years of age. Although Young was a professional engineer, his first position after his arrival in South Australia in October 1850 was as an Assistant-master in the newly founded proprietary High School on the S.A. Company's premises on North Terrace. Later, he opened a school in Ebenezer Place, off Rundle Street East. Clark was the first Honorary Secretary of the infant Society and held that office for nine years. Then, a glutton for challenge, he held a position of Hon Treasurer for eleven years – a difficult period during an economic depression. Ironically, on the celebration of the Twenty Fifth Anniversary of the Philosophical Society of Adelaide on September 30th 1878, shortly before Royal accession, his death had to be recorded by the Council.

Also, in attendance at the three preliminary meetings at Young's house, as well as at the inaugural gathering to launch the Society, was Charles Gregory Feinaigle. He was a 35 year old BA graduate from Trinity College, Dublin whose name appears for the first time in the *South Australian Almanac* for 1851 as the Headmaster of the High School. He is cited as the originator of the scheme to launch the Society.

Dr William Grosse and a Mr Jones, whose history is obscure, made up the remaining members of the inaugurating committee. After being co-opted as Vice-President in 1855, as well as presenting a paper on Respiration in August, Grosse was still recorded as a full member twenty five years later. This record appeared in the format of the first issue of the

Transactions and Proceedings of the Philosophical Society which is not too dissimilar from the Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia Inc today. Namely, presentations to the Society appear as fully peer-reviewed, Council-approved papers. The Transactions have continued to be published ever since.

By January 1854 the infant Society had grown to thirty-five members, it had a properly constituted set of Rules and it had adopted its first Annual Report. Among its Officers it had attracted His Excellency Sir H.E.F. Young as President.

The Men

In addition to committing their effort to both the formation and ongoing contributions to the meetings of the Philosophical Society, these young men were more than just academic. Both Young and Feinaigle were "seized with gold fever and went to the Victorian Diggings". Another founding Member, Edward Davy, "...a versatile doctor..." had "...already been recognised, ..." back in England. "... as a formidable rival to ...Cooke and Wheatstone in telegraphy". Once in Adelaide, he pursued a career as a journalist and was editor of *The Adelaide Examiner*. Later he was a manager of the Yatala Copper Smelting works and was Controller of the Government Assay Office where gold tokens were being coined for the first time in Australia. Shortly after this he became a farmer and then ran a sideshow.

W.W.R. Whitridge was a journalist and pastoralist and, being the editor of the *Austral Examiner* and subsequently of *The Register*, he advocated the value and practiced the art, of publicity: especially of the papers of the Adelaide Philosophical Society. Not only was he a very literary man who presented an erudite paper on Cassius Longinus - *The Philosopher's Critic* in February, 1854, but in 1859, he talked on "...a few experiments made by the writer ..." on "... ozonometric standards...". Sadly, he died at the age of 36 years.

Among these founding members, the premier renaissance man must be awarded to Mr B. Herschel Babbage. Among his papers read over the first five years of reported meetings, Babbage's included one on "The Art of the Daguerreotyping". Others ranged from "...Meteorological Observations", through "The Presence of Basaltic and Trap Rocks in Gold Formation in the Colony" and "The Connection Between Deficient House-drainage and Disease". Historically, his detailed discussion about a proposed Expedition into the Interior was of political significance and it was the Lord Bishop of Adelaide who moved the vote of thanks! This diversity is perhaps unsurprising when one recalls that this

Babbage's father was the noted English mathematician, controversialist and father of the computer, Charles Babbage.

To enliven the diversity of our own titles, our Programme Officer may like to take note of two abstracts in 1854 and 1855, Charles Davies spoke on "Spontaneous Combustion" and "Human Spontaneous Combustion"!

The "Confinement" Before the Birth and Post-parturition

The precursors to the formation of the Adelaide Philosophical Society can be traced back to the Adelphi Chambers, London in August 1834 when the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association was founded (a fortnight after the Colony had received Royal assent). After various misadventures, a library chest of somewhat damaged books eventually arrived in Adelaide, together with the Royal Charter for the Colony. The state of such goods and the delay in arrival, did not augur well for the success of the Association and, indeed, further meetings in South Australia soon ceased. Over the next ten turbulent years, attempts to develop "The Adelaide Mechanics' Institute" failed. This Institute was developed along the similar lines to the bodies of mechanics that had been formed back in Britain by the Quaker George Birkbeck. These Institutes were deemed to improve the souls and the earning capacity of mechanics. The very elitist middle class, Adelaide Subscription Library was also instituted. It too was modelled on the best English examples with high subscriptions and exclusive membership. The perspicacious Charles Mann, Crown Solicitor, intellectual and subsequently a Member of the embryonic Philosophical Society, had identified that the pressure of employment necessary for early establishment of immigration in the new colony had been responsible for the demise of the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association. His view now applied to the Adelaide Subscription Library. This august body similarly declined. However, by 1848, following an approach by the Mechanics' Institute, an amalgamation surprisingly gave rise, even after some early mismanagement, to the "...lustly infant..." the South Australian Institute. Incorporation of the six-year old Philosophical Society with it was effected in 1859. While the liaison was not wholly advantageous to the Philosophical Society, it had established itself as a presenter of material of high standard. Upwards of 200 papers had been read by 1870 at nearly 170 meetings. Moreover, brief abstracts of the Transactions of the Philosophical Society, appeared during a period of inconsistent annual reporting as appendices in the Annual Reports of the South Australian Institute.

Celebrate and Commit

So, putting aside the difficulties that the infant Society endured, up until its accession to become the Royal Society of South Australia, we can celebrate 2003, with some historic pride, as the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the inception of our predecessor in 1853.

Perhaps, during the next 27 years, before our Royal patronage of 1880 can be formally celebrated, we can be jolted into ensuring that we now build on the firm foot-hold that our predecessors have provided us over the past 150 years. We must square up to the challenge that we have recently confirmed in the revision of our Constitution and Rules. The promotion and diffusion of scientific knowledge includes

(i) a maintenance of our high standard of publication,

(ii) high orders of diverse presentations to our Fellowship and guests,

(iii) stronger encouragement to our younger investigators and

(iv) a commitment through our Fellowship to widen the benefit to the general community with the fruits of our corporate and individual curiosity.

In addressing these aims I would like to see several developments.

While maintaining the very high quality of peer review, the Transactions and other publications should be made into even more widely accessible modes of dissemination – by format modification and electronic availability.

The promotion of our already broad programme of presentations and meetings needs to be tailored to encourage audiences to recognise the broader spectrum of interactive knowledge that has become

denied by the more specialist meetings frequented by many of us practicing scientists. (The *raison d'être* of our Society may even nourish the manifestation of a phoenix from the ashes of a defunct ANZAAS!).

Given the huge reservoir of expertise and experience in our membership, the Royal Society of South Australia Inc. has a responsibility to generate a more recognisable profile and catalyse a stronger authority between the knowledge bases of the relevant institutions around the state and ourselves, and beyond. That responsibility includes addressing the optimal way that the contents of our library, 40% of which is unique within South Australia, can be accessed.

Finally, while we all acknowledge that a vibrant and actively developing membership base is crucial, of more importance is what resource we can offer that membership. We need to be cognisant of what our resources really are. Acquisition, upgrading and management of those resources are our co-operative responsibilities. In the current politically correct vernacular, we might have described our “lusty infants” as resource-deprived. But they were endeavour-rich. Can the Royal Society of South Australia Inc, match their resolve in the next one hundred and fifty years? I believe that we can and will.

So, as we celebrate the resource-rich status that our forefathers have laid down, can we take this opportunity to ask ourselves what contribution each can now make to provide the legacy for the next 27 years towards the celebration of the anniversary of Royal accession?

Ole W. Wiebkin
President
31st May 2003